The Magnificent Ambersons

By Booth Tarkington

"AUTOMOBILES ARE A USELESS NUISANCE."

Synopsis.—Major Amberson has made a fortune in 1873 when other people were losing fortunes, and the magnificence of the Ambersons began then. Major Amberson laid out a 200-acre "development," with roads and statuary, and in the center of a four-acre tract, on Amberson avenue, built for himself the most magnificent mansion Midland City had ever seen. When the major's daughter married young Wilbur Minafer the neighbors predicted that as Isabel could never really love Wilbur all her love would be bestowed upon the children. There is only one child, however, George Amberson Minafer, and his upbringing and his youthful accomplishments as a mischief maker are quite in keeping with the most pessimistic predictions. By the time George goes away to college he does not attempt to conceal his belief that the Ambersons are about the most important family in the world. At a ball given in his honor when he returns from college, George monopolizes Lucy Morgan, a stranger and the prettiest girl present, and gets on famously with her until he learns that a "queer looking duck" at whom he had been poking much fun, is the young lady's father. He is Eugene Morgan, a former resident of Bigburg, and he is returning to erect a factory and to build horseless carriages of his own invention. Eugene had been an old admirer of Isabel and they had been engaged when Isabel threw him over because of a youthful indiscretion and married Wilbur Minafer. George makes rapid progress in his courtship of Lucy. A cotillion helps their acquaintance along famously. Their "friendship" continues during his absences at college. George and Lucy become "almost engaged." There is a family quarrel over a division of property which reveals that both George's Aunt Fanny and George's mother are more or less interested in Eugene Morgan. George's father dies. George is graduated. He and Lucy remain "almost engaged." George announces to her his intention to be a gentleman of leisure.

CHAPTER XII—Continued.

—9—

"What kind?"

"Whatever appeals to me," he said.

Lucy looked at him with grieved wonder. "But you really don't mean to have any regular business or profession at all?"

"I certainly do not!" George returned promptly and emphatically.

"I was afraid so," she said in a low voice.

George continued to breathe deeply throughout another protracted interval of silence. Then he said, "Your father is a business man—"

"He's a mechanical genius," Lucy interrupted quickly. "Of course he's both. And he was a lawyer once—he's done all sorts of things."

"Very well. I merely wished to ask if it's his influence that makes you think I ought to 'do' something?"

Lucy frowned slightly. "Why, I suppose almost everything I think or say must be owing to his influence in one way or another. We haven't had anybody but each other for so many years, and we always think about alike, so of course—"

"I see!" And George's brow darkened with resentment. "So that's it, is it? It's your father's idea that I ought to go into business and that you oughtn't to be engaged to me until I do."

Lucy gave a start, her denial was so quick. "No! I've never once spoken to him about it. Never!"

George looked at her keenly, and he jumped to a conclusion not far from the truth. "But you know without talking to him that it's the way he does feel about it? I see."

She nodded gravely. "Yes."

George's brow grew darker still. "Do you think I'd be much of a man," he said slowly, "if I let any other man dictate to me my own way of life?"

"George! Who's dictating your—"

"It seems to me it amounts to that!"

"Oh, No! I only know how papa thinks about things. He's never, never spoken unkindly or 'dictatingly' of you." Her face was so touching in its distress that for the moment George forgot his anger. He seized that small, troubled hand.

"Lucy," he said huskily. "Don't you know that I love you?"

"Yes—I do."

"Don't you love me?"

"Yes—I do."

"Then what does it matter what your father thinks about my doing something or not doing anything? He has his way, and I have mine. Why, look at your father's best friend, my Uncle George Amberson—he's never done anything in his life, and—"

"Oh, yes, he has," she interrupted. "He was in politics."

"Well, I'm glad he's out," George said. "Politics is a dirty business for a gentleman, and Uncle George would tell you that himself. Lucy, let's not talk any more about it. Let me tell mother when I get home that we're engaged. Won't you, dear?"

She shook her head. "No," she said, and gave him a sudden little look of renewed gayety. "Let's let it stay 'almost.'"

"Because your father—"

"Oh, because it's better!"

George's voice shook. "Isn't it your father?"

"It's his ideals I'm thinking of—yes."

George dropped her hand abruptly and anger narrowed his eyes. "I know what you mean," he said. "I dare say I don't care for your father's ideals any more than he does for mine!"

He tightened the reins, Pendennis quickening eagerly to the trot; and when George jumped out of the runabout before Lucy's gate, and assisted her to descend, the silence in which they parted was the same that had begun when Pendennis began to trot.

CHAPTER XIII.

George went driving the next afternoon alone and, encountering Lucy and her father on the road, in one of Morgan's cars, lifted his hat, but nowise relaxed his formal countenance as they passed. Eugene waved a cordial hand quickly returned to the steering wheel; but Lucy only nodded gravely and smiled no more than George did. Nor did she accompany Eugene to the Major's for dinner the following Sunday evening, though both were bidden to attend that feast, which was already reduced in numbers and gayety by the absence of George Amberson. Eugene explained to his host that Lucy had gone away to visit a school friend.

The information, delivered in the library, just before old Sam's appearance to announce dinner, set Miss Minafer in quite a flutter. "Why, George!" she said, turning to her nephew, "How does it happen you didn't tell us?" And with both hands opening, as if to express her innocence of some conspiracy, she exclaimed to the others: "He's never said one word to us about Lucy's planning to go away!"

"Probably afraid to," the Major suggested. "Didn't know but he might break down and cry if he tried to speak of it!" He clapped his grandson on the shoulder, inquiring jocularly: "That it, Georgie?"

Georgie made no reply, but he was red enough to justify the Major's developing a chuckle into laughter; though Miss Fanny, observing her nephew keenly, got an impression that his fiery blush was in truth more fiery than tender.

After the arrival of coffee the Major was rallying Eugene upon some rival automobile shops lately built in a suburb, and already promising to flourish.

"I suppose they'll either drive you out of the business," said the old gentleman, "or else the two of you'll drive all the rest of us off the streets."

"If we do we'll even things up by making the streets five or ten times as long as they are now," Eugene returned.

"How do you propose to do that?"

"It isn't the distance from the center of a town that counts," said Eugene; "it's the time it takes to get

"George, Dear!" She Said, "What Did You Mean?"

there. This town's already spreading; bicycles and trolleys have been doing their share, but the automobile is going to carry city streets clear out to the county line."

The Major was skeptical. "Dream on, fair son!" he said. "It's lucky for us that you're only dreaming; because if people go to moving that far, real estate values in the old residence part of town are going to be stretched pretty thin."

"I'm afraid so," Eugene assented. "Unless you keep things so bright and clean that the old section will stay more attractive than the new ones."

"Not very likely! How are things going to be kept 'bright and clean' with soft coal and our kind of city government?"

"They aren't," Eugene replied quickly. "There's no hope of it, and already the boarding house is marching up National avenue. My relatives, the Sharons, have sold their house and are building in the country—at least, they call it 'the country.' It will be city in two or three years."

"Good gracious!" the Major exclaimed, affecting dismay. "So your little shops are going to ruin all your old friends, Eugene!"

"Unless my old friends take warning in time, or abolish smoke and get a new kind of city government."

"Well, well!" the Major laughed. "You have enough faith in miracles, Eugene—granting that trolleys and bicycles and automobiles are miracles. So you think they're to change the face of the land, do you?"

"They're already doing it, Major; and it can't be stopped. Automobiles—"

At this point he was interrupted. George was the interrupter. He had said nothing since entering the dining room, but now he spoke in a loud and peremptory voice, using the tone of one in authority who checks idle prattle and settles a matter forever.

"Automobiles are a useless nuisance," he said.

There fell a moment's silence.

Isabel gazed incredulously at George, color slowly heightening upon her cheeks and temples, while Fanny watched him with a quick eagerness, her eyes alert and bright. But Eugene seemed merely quizzical, as if not taking this brusquerie to himself. The Major was seriously disturbed.

"What did you say, George?" he asked, though George had spoken but too distinctly.

"I said all automobiles were a nuisance," George answered, repeating not only the words but the tone in which he had uttered them. And he added; "They'll never amount to anything but a nuisance. They had no business to be invented."

The Major frowned. "Of course you forget that Mr. Morgan makes them, and also did his share in inventing them. If you weren't so thoughtless he might think you rather offensive."

"That would be too bad," said George coolly. "I don't think I could survive it."

Again there was a silence, while the Major stared at his grandson, aghast. But Eugene began to laugh cheerfully.

"I'm not sure he's wrong about automobiles," he said. "With all their speed forward they may be a step backward in civilization—that is, in spiritual civilization. But automobiles have come, and they bring a greater change in our life than most of us suspect. They are going to alter war, and they are going to alter peace. I think men's minds are going to be changed in subtle ways because of automobiles; just how, though, I could hardly guess. Perhaps, ten or twenty years from now, if we can see the inward change in men by that time, I shouldn't be able to defend the gasoline engine, but would have to agree with him that automobiles 'had no business to be invented.'" He laughed good-naturedly and, looking at his watch, apologized for having an engagement which made his departure necessary when he would much prefer to linger, and left them at the table.

Isabel turned wondering, hurt eyes upon her son. "George, dear!" she said, "What did you mean?"

"Just what I said," he returned, lighting one of the Major's cigars.

Isabel's hand, pale and slender, upon the tablecloth, touched one of the fine silver candlesticks aimlessly; the fingers were seen to tremble. "Oh, he was hurt!" she murmured.

"I don't see why he should be," George said. "I didn't say anything about him. What made you think he was hurt?"

"I know him!" was all of her reply, half-whispered.

The Major stared hard at George from under his white eyebrows. "You didn't mean 'him,' you say, George? I suppose if we had a clergyman as a guest here you'd expect him not to be offended, and to understand that your remarks were neither personal nor untactful if you said the church was a nuisance and ought never to have been invented. We seem to have a new kind of young people these days. It's a new style of courting a pretty girl, certainly, for a young fellow to go deliberately out of his way to try and make an enemy of her father by attacking his business! By Jove! That's a new way to win a woman!"

George flushed angrily and seemed about to offer a retort, but held his breath for a moment; and then held his peace. It was Isabel who responded to the Major. "Oh, no!" she said. "Eugene would never be anybody's enemy—he couldn't!—and last of all Georgie's. I'm afraid he was hurt, but I don't fear his not having understood that George spoke without thinking of what he was saying—I mean, without realizing its bearing on Eugene."

"Well, well," said his grandfather, rising, "It wasn't a very successful little dinner!"

Thereupon he offered his arm to his daughter, who took it fondly, and they left the room, Isabel assuring him that all his little dinners were pleasant, and that this one was no exception.

George did not move, and Fanny, following the other two, came round the table and paused close beside his chair; but George remained posed in great imperturbability, cigar between teeth, eyes upon ceiling, and paid no attention to her. Fanny waited until the sound of Isabel's and the Major's voices became inaudible in the hall. Then she said quickly, and in a low voice so eager that it was unsteady:

"George, you've struck just the treatment to adopt; you're doing the right thing!"

She hurried out, scurrying after the others with a faint rustling of her

George Was Never More Furious.

black skirts, leaving George mystified but incurious.

In truth, however, he was neither so comfortable nor so imperturbable as he appeared. He felt some gratification; he had done a little to put the man in his place—that man whose influence upon his daughter was precisely the same thing as a contemptuous criticism of George Amberson Minafer, and of George Amberson Minafer's "ideals of life." Lucy's going away without a word was intended, he supposed, as a bit of punishment. Well, he wasn't the sort of man that people were allowed to punish; he could demonstrate that to them—since they started it!

Isabel came to George's door that night and, when she had kisesd him good-night, she remained in the open doorway with her hand upon his shoulder and her eyes thoughtfully lowered, so that her wish to say something more than good-night was evident. Not less obvious was her perplexity about the manner of saying it; and George, divining her thought, amiably made an opening for her.

"Well, old lady," he said, indulgently, "you needn't look so worried. I won't be tactless with Morgan again. After this I'll just keep out of his way."

"Dear," she said, "I wish you'd tell me something: Why don't you like Eugene?"

"Oh, I like him well enough," George returned, with a short laugh, as he sat down and began to unlace his shoes. "I like him well enough—in his place."

"No, dear," she said hurriedly. "I've had a feeling from the very first that you didn't really like him—that you really never liked him. I can't understand it, dear; I don't see what can be the matter."

"Nothing's the matter."

This easy declaration naturally failed to carry great weight, and Isabel went on, in her troubled voice: "It seems so queer, especially when you feel as you do about his daughter."

At this, George stopped unlacing his shoes abruptly, and sat up. "How do I feel about his daughter?" he demanded.

"Well, it's seemed—as if—as if—" Isabel began timidly. "It did seem—At least, you haven't looked at any other girl ever since they came here, and—certainly you've seemed very much interested in her. Certainly you've been very great friends?"

"Well, what of that?"

"It's only that I'm like your grandfather: I can't see how you could be so much interested in a girl and—and not feel very pleasantly toward her father."

"Well, I'll tell you something," George said slowly, and a frown of concentration could be seen upon his brow, as from a profound effort at self-examination. "The truth is, I don't believe I've ever thought of the two together, exactly—at least, not until lately. I've always thought of Lucy just as Lucy, and of Morgan just as Morgan. I've always thought of her as a person herself, not as anybody's daughter. If I have a friend, I don't see that it's incumbent upon me to like my friend's relatives. Now, suppose I have certain ideas or ideals which I have chosen for the regulation of my own conduct in life. Suppose some friend of mine has a relative with ideals directly the opposite of mine, and my friend believes more in the relative's ideals than in mine: Do you think I ought to give up my own just to please a person who's taken up ideals that I really despise?"

"No, dear; of course people can't give up their ideals; but I don't see what this has to do with dear little Lucy and—"

"I didn't say it had anything to do with them," he interrupted. "I was merely putting a case to show how a person would be justified in being a friend of one member of a family and feeling anything but friendly toward another. I don't say, though, that I feel unfriendly to Mr. Morgan. I don't say that I feel friendly to him, and I don't say that I feel unfriendly; but if you really think that I was rude to him tonight—"

"Just thoughtless, dear. You didn't see that what you said tonight—"

"Well, I'll not say anything of that sort again where he can hear it. There, isn't that enough?"

"But, George," she said earnestly, "you would like him, if you'd just let yourself. You say you don't dislike him. Why don't you like him? I can't understand at all. What is it that you don't—"

"There, there!" he said. "It's all right, and you toddle along."

"But, George—"

"Now, now! I really do want to get into bed. Good-night, old lady."

"But, George, dear—"

"I'm going to bed, old lady; so good-night."

Thus the interview closed perforce. She kissed him again before going slowly to her own room, her perplexity evidently not dispersed; but the subject was not renewed between them the next day or subsequently. Nor did Fanny make any allusion to the cryptic approbation she had bestowed upon her nephew after the Major's "not very successful little dinner," though she annoyed George by looking at him oftener and longer than he cared to be looked at by an aunt.

He successfully avoided contact with Lucy's father, though Eugene came frequently to the house, and spent several evenings with Isabel and Fanny; and sometimes persuaded them and the Major to go for an afternoon's motoring. He did not, however, come again to the Major's Sunday evening dinner, even when George Amberson returned. Sunday evening was the time, he explained, for going over the week's work with his factory managers.

* * * * * * *

When Lucy came home the autumn was far enough advanced to smell of burning leaves, and for the annual editorials, in the papers, on the purple haze, the golden branches, the ruddy fruit, and the pleasure of long tramps in the brown forest. George had not heard of her arrival, and he met her, on the afternoon following that event, at the Sharons', where he had gone in the secret hope that he might hear something about her. Janie Sharon had just begun to tell him that she heard Lucy was expected home soon, after having "a perfectly gorgeous time"—information which George received with no responsive enthusiasm—when Lucy came demurely in, a proper little autumn figure in green and brown.

Her cheeks were flushed and her dark eyes were bright indeed; evidences, as George supposed, of the excitement incidental to the perfectly gorgeous time just concluded; though Janie and Mary Sharon both thought they were the effect of Lucy's having seen George's runabout in front of the house as she came in. George took on color, himself, as he rose and nodded indifferently; and the hot suffusion to which he became subject extended its area to include his neck and ears. Nothing could have made him much more indignant than his consciousness of these symptoms of the icy indifference which it was his purpose not only to show but to feel.

She kissed her cousins, gave George her hand, said "How d'you do," and took a chair beside Janie with a composure which augmented George's indignation.

"How d'you do?" he said. "I trust that ah—I trust—I do trust—"

He stopped, for it seemed to him that the word "trust" sounded idiotic. Then, to cover his awkwardness, he coughed, and even to his own rosy ears his cough was ostentatiously a false one. Lucy sat silent and the two Sharon girls leaned forward, staring at him with strained eyes, their lips tightly compressed; and both were but too easily diagnosed as subject to an agitation which threatened their self-control. He began again.

"I tr—I hope you have had a—a pleasant time. I tr—I hope you are well. I hope you are extremely—I hope extremely—extremely—"

"I beg your pardon?" Lucy said.

George was never more furious; he felt that he was "making a spectacle of himself;" and no young gentleman in the world was more loath than George Amberson Minafer to look a figure of fun. And while he stood there, undeniably such a figure, with Janie and Mary Sharon threatening to burst at any moment, if laughter were longer denied them, Lucy sat looking at him with her eyebrows delicately lifted in casual, polite inquiry. Her own complete composure was what most galled him.

"Nothing of the slightest importance!" he managed to say. "I was just leaving. Good-afternoon!" And with long strides he reached the door and hasteneu through the hall; but before he closed the door he heard from Janie and Mary Sharon the outburst of wild, irrepressible emotion which his performance had inspired.

He drove home in a tumultuous mood, and almost ran down two ladies who were engaged in absorbing conversation at a crossing. They were his Aunt Fanny and Mrs. Johnson; a jerk of the reins at the last instant saved them by a few inches; but their conversation was so interesting that they were unaware of their danger, and did not notice the runabout, nor how close it came to them.

He drove into the Major's stable too fast, the sagacious Pendennis saving himself from going through a partition by a swerve which splintered a shaft of the runabout and almost threw the driver to the floor. George swore, and then swore again at the fat old darkey, Tom, for giggling at his swearing.

He strode from the stable, crossed the Major's back yard, then passed behind the new houses, on his way home. These structures were now approaching completion, but still in a state of rawness hideous to George—though, for that matter, they were never to be anything except hideous to him.

In this temper he emerged from behind the house nearest his own and, glancing toward the street, saw his mother standing with Eugene Morgan upon the cement path that led to the front gate. She was bareheaded and Eugene held his hat and stick in his hand; evidently he had been calling upon her, and she had come from the house with him, continuing their conversation and delaying their parting.

George stared at them. A hot dislike struck him at the sight of Eugene; and a vague revulsion, like a strange, unpleasant taste in his mouth, came over him as he looked at his mother; her manner was eloquent of so much thought about her companion and of such reliance upon him.

The two began to walk on toward the gate, where they stopped, turning to face each other, and Isabel's glance, passing Eugene, fell upon George. Instantly she smiled and waved her hand to him, while Eugene turned and nodded; but George, standing as in some rigid trance, and staring straight at them, gave these signals of greeting

Gave These Signals of Greeting No Sign of Recognition Whatever.

no sign of recognition whatever. Upon this, Isabel called to him, waving her hand again.

"Georgie!" she called, laughing. "Wake up, dear! Georgie, hello!"

George turned away as if he had neither seen nor heard, and stalked into the house by the side door.

George has a rude awakening and starts lots of trouble.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

The Making of a Match.

Thorpe gives the following proportions for match head and for striking surface: Head composition: Potassium chlorat, five parts; potassium bichromat, two parts; glass powder, three parts; gum, two parts. Rubbing surface: Antimony trisulfid, five parts; red phosphorus, three parts; manganese dioxid, one and one-half parts; glue, four parts.—Electrical Experimenter.